

# *Madame Grès*



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

# *Madame Grès*

RICHARD MARTIN  
AND  
HAROLD KODA

*Photographs by  
Marcia Lippman*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York

## SPONSOR'S STATEMENT

It is with pride that Yagi Tsusho Limited, Yagi Tsusho America Inc., and Grès S.A.R.L., France, join The Metropolitan Museum of Art in presenting this exhibition of the work of Madame Grès.

Easily one of the most uncompromising and evocative designers of the twentieth century, Madame Grès, founder of the Grès House and honorary chairperson of the Haute Couture Association in Paris, has risen to the highest echelons of fashion design along with Chanel and Vionnet.

The mutually rewarding corporate relationship we have built since 1977 has led to our full partnership with Grès's outstanding fashion house. Our involvement in cultural activities has reflected our fundamental belief that creativity inevitably enriches society. Furthermore, we believe that the arts, by melding a unique transcultural language, facilitate profound exchange.

Through this exceptional window of opportunity as sponsors, we have the distinct honor of contributing to an international dialogue encompassing France, Japan, and the United States. It is our desire that by our participation in this event we fulfill both our cultural and our corporate roles.

Yuzo Yagi

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o elect to devote an exhibition at The Costume Institute to the work of an individual living designer is a significant decision. Yet we have chosen to do so unequivocally for Madame Grès. We tender our highest esteem for this designer of exceptional vision, whose work is untrammelled by commerce or compromise. She has fulfilled the highest objectives of art for two-thirds of this century.

Madame Grès is a creation. *Née* Germaine Barton, Grès assumed her name in two stages of metamorphosis. Relinquishing the given name she disliked in the early 1930s, she became Alix Barton. Needing a new name to reestablish her business in 1940, she took on a variation of her painter husband's *nom de brosse*, Grès, itself a fractional anagram of his given name, Serge Czerefkov. Invention is the heart of Grès's imagination.

Grès invented one model that she practiced, polished, perfected, and purified. Her Grecian gown, the *drapé* or draped dress, has been her emblem for nearly two-thirds of this century. Grès's sensual purity is akin to sculptor Antonio Canova's ideal of supple and voluptuous classicism and also to painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's evocation of the tremulous, yet still, beauty of liquid line. Undeniably, Grès's *drapé* is a supreme cipher; it owes its imputed mystery to the elements of voluptuous excitability, pensive sensuality, and repressed eroticism. It is a perfect neo-classicism. A 1954 Willy Maywald photograph of a live model with exposed breast who is wearing a Grès *drapé* demonstrates its ecstatic *affettuoso* classicism that is charged with Hans Castorp's feverish vision of the Greek temple in *The Magic Mountain*. A 1938 George Hoyningen-Huené photograph of a *drapé* with caryatid presence testifies to the deliberate reserve emblematic of neoclassical solidity.

Grès creates her *drapés* face-to-face with the live model—a Rodinesque practice that exudes a feeling of tangible proximity to flesh and a sense of surety in rendering the body that are similar to that modern sculptor's works. While most modern dress evolves through flat pattern, a two-dimensional conception, Grès begins with three dimensions, circling and swiveling the drapery around the real body. Grès's sculptural *façon de*

*parler* is a function of her technique, and it is also evident in the results. Because she creates her toile three-dimensionally, she has already progressed to cloth before making any decisions and so has the opportunity to observe, maneuver, and manipulate the material. Grès realizes her forms through the direct action of the cloth—whether she is using her billowing taffetas, her buoyant jerseys, or her flowing silk crepes. Her truth to materials is not merely a modernist conviction; it is also a consequence of the dressmaker's skills that she employs. In the case of the *drapés*, the delicate fluting of the cloth is the result of the fingering shirr of countless manipulations. Grès stirs the cloth with a masterful painter's precision, delicacy, and certainty; she pushes and pulls the flat textile into a spatial dynamic as surely as any Hans Hofmann student who was taught by that painter to create visual tension by his push-pull dialectic method. Grès respects the cloth as a whole, always preferring not to cut. Thus, the structural integrity (generally undiscernible) of the *drapés* resides in their unbroken panels of fabric. These panels are left whole even as the torso is fingered (and later sewn) into delicate pleats, the waist is generally more tightly squeezed, and the skirt is released into a fuller whirl of the cloth as it descends from its molded shaping above. In her continuing exploration of the possibilities inherent in her favorite medium, Grès challenges the self-imposed conventions of her signature garment. Hers is a virtuoso achievement, reached through persistent devotion to the task of manipulating the classic *drapé* in infinite variations.

It is the consummate control of her sculptor-dressmaker's hand that gives the Grès *drapé* its sensuous trace of the body. Every *drapé*, with its pleated and coiled outer layer and its body-cleaving anatomy, is securely anchored and fixed through understructure to the body. The adherence of the dress to the torso without possibility of migration or accidental shifting imbues the drapery with an immutable classical poise. The act of cutting away to create the upper-body breaches in the *drapés* does not result in peek-a-boo titillation; it is more like a modern art of cutouts and excisions, baring structure and design.

It is significant in this publication and in the exhibition that accompanies it to see a number of Grès's *drapés en suite*. They invoke T. S. Eliot's wisdom that every new work of art implicates those that have gone before. With the creation of each new work, the ideal order of the preced-



1. Left: Evening gown, 1963. White silk jersey. Gift of Mrs. Leon L. Roos, 1973 (1973.104.2). Center: Evening gown, 1962. White silk jersey. Anonymous Gift (1983.284.2). Right: Evening gown, 1963. Peach silk jersey. Gift of Mrs. Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1967 (CI 67.2.1abc).

ing piece is changed into a new one by virtue of Grès's continual modifications. Indeed, Grès's thoroughly modernist invention even changes our perception of classical dress. Although we might have imagined a classical simulation in the manner of Mariano Fortuny's Delphos gowns, we did not expect the ancient model to be susceptible to Grès's analytical resourcefulness in such a plainly modern mode. Conventional wisdom would claim that Grès is timeless. To be sure, she resists momentary interests. But she is not timeless; she transforms time.

In other forms beyond the *drapé*, Grès also practices her dressmaker's push-pull of the most delicate compressions and inflations in cloth. Paper taffeta crinkles and crumples, but it is eased into form by the designer's hand; bias crepe flows both along and away from the body. Even her tailored clothing betrays the dressmaker's sensibility to subtle shaping. No other designer of the first half of the twentieth century cant the armhole and sleeve back rather than forward. Only Grès practices the design perversity—and ingenuity—of shifting the shoulder back in a dislocation that only an arm in the sleeve corrects. Her angora dresses and capes may initially suggest adherence to standard geometry, but upon examination they reveal their distortion from geometric principles to the body's conditions. Reverent to the cloth, Grès tucks and gathers to bring shape to the flat fields as she does to the *drapé*; she renders flat semaphores into wrapping, swaddling forms pleasurable for the body.

Dressmaking talent alone does not explain Grès. She also brings to clothing a curious imagination. She does not set out to copy exotic or historical dress, but she absorbs global possibilities and historical potential. She reinvents non-Western clothing in marvelous hybrid confluences of her own invention, with a fantastic traveler's eye that witnesses and remakes. Diverse emulations of world dress are filtered through Grès's nimble fingers. The helical "Pagoda" jacket of 1935 evokes Eastern magic, but in the context of a Cubist multiplicity of perspectives. Specifically, Grès's awareness of the sari must have been enhanced by her sojourn in India, but it is her lifelong interest in dominoes, caftans, and other untailored constructions that affected the liquid softness of her 1970s work. In fact, Grès's strength and influence in the 1970s are directly attributable to her intuitive affinity for the non-Western forms that entered the Western fashion vocabulary in that decade. Her long interest in

the kimono sleeve evolved from a kind of metabolized *Japonisme*. She skillfully took from Japanese design and Kabuki gesturalism and transformed them by her personal sense of clothing as silent drama. Her flamboyance with fabric finds an outlet in the swag of a *robe à la polonaise* or the volume of a gigot sleeve as a model recalled from the past. Her sportswear can seem as effortless as Halston, to whom she was an inspiration.

In 1979, Enid Nemy wrote in the *New York Times*, “It is still difficult for fashion writers to describe a Grès collection, because it’s all been said before. . . . But perhaps the design genius of the woman is best illustrated by the fact that several hundred of the world’s best dressed and most influential fashion figures would not be without at least one new Grès design annually, almost always an evening dress.”

We first projected a Grès exhibition at the Fashion Institute of Technology in the late 1980s, when we realized that the finest collection in the world was at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Moreover, we learned that Diana Vreeland and Grès had, in extended correspondence and planning, conceived and projected an exhibition for The Costume Institute and that Grès (who had long esteemed her American clientele) held such a plan as her prized wish. We are honored to be able to fulfill Grès’s dream, along with Mrs. Vreeland’s. Grès seems so especially right, not only for this place but also for this moment, when there is a distinct rejection of fad and folly and when we yearn evermore for a “luxe, calme, et volupté.” Ironically, the woman who stands as doyenne of the couture now offers an ideal of fashion as fresh and nonchalant as sportswear, as sophisticated and astringent as modernist design on a human and humanist base, and as suggestive as history’s succession, in which Grès herself is an immortal.

Richard Martin, Curator, and Harold Koda, Associate Curator,  
The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art





2. Asymmetrical coat, 1985. Red double-faced wool. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner.

3. Opposite page. Left: Day suit, 1968. Black-and-cream double-faced wool. Gift of Rosamond Bernier, 1994 (1994.147.5a,b). Right: Day suit, mid-1960s. Brown double-faced wool. Gift of Anne Helen Hess, in memory of Audrey S. Hess, 1975 (1975.79.2a,b).







4. Opposite page. Cocktail dress, 1980. Blue silk taffeta and black organza. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner.

5. Day suit, 1947. Oatmeal wool tweed. Gift of Mrs. Disque D. Dean, 1968 (CI 68.60.2a,b).



6. Left: Evening gown, ca. 1952. Black silk taffeta. Gift of Ernest L. Byfield, Jr., 1980 (1980.485.5). Right: Short evening dress, 1954. Blue-gray, gray-green, and black silk taffeta. Gift of Mrs. Murray Graham, 1961 (CI 61.39.4).



7. Evening gown and bolero jacket, 1956. Multicolored chiné silk taffeta by Bianchini. Gift of Lilly Daché, 1974 (1974.306.5a,b).





8. Opposite page. Left: Evening gown, 1938. Red-and-black moiré silk ribbon. Gift of Mrs. Harrison Williams, Lady Mendl, and Mrs. Ector Munn, 1946 (CI 46.4.12). Right: Evening gown, 1974. Black silk velvet and silk taffeta. Gift of Alix Grès, 1976 (1976.35).

9. Left: Evening gown, ca. 1970. Midnight-blue silk taffeta. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner. Right: Evening gown, ca. 1970. Black silk taffeta. Gift of Alain de Gunzburg, in memory of Minda de Gunzburg, 1985 (1985.272.8).





10. Evening coat, 1935. Gold-and-black lamé. Gift of Miss Ellerbe Wood, 1940 (CI 40.172).



11. Evening ensemble, ca. 1970. Teal blue silk taffeta and black silk chiffon with beaded embroidery. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner.



12. Left: Evening dress, ca. 1975. Beige-and-brown angora jersey. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner. Center: Evening ensemble, ca. 1975. Violet angora jersey. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner. Right: Evening gown and cape, ca. 1965. Raspberry, orange, and blue-violet angora jersey. Courtesy Marjorie Reed Gordon.

13. Opposite page. Evening gown and apron, 1978. Dark green silk jersey and silk velvet. Courtesy Chesbrough Rayner.





14. Left: Evening gown, ca. 1980. White silk jersey and organza. Courtesy Mrs. Randolph Hearst. Center: Evening gown, ca. 1969. Yellow silk jersey. Courtesy Marjorie Reed Gordon. Right: Two-piece evening gown, ca. 1969. Hot pink silk jersey. Courtesy Marjorie Reed Gordon.



15. Left: Evening gown, 1965. White silk jersey. Anonymous Gift (1983.284.1).  
Center: Evening gown, ca. 1965. White silk jersey. Courtesy Mrs. Oscar de la Renta.  
Right: Evening gown, 1950. White silk jersey with gold lamé ribbons. Gift of  
Mrs. Byron C. Foy, 1956 (CI 56.60.6ab).

Front cover. In the 1930s, like many French designers who were looking to non-European style in the détente of Western garment construction, Grès turned to alternate costume traditions with a dramatic flair, perhaps due to her interest in the theater. (She designed theater costumes for Jean Cocteau, Jean Giraudoux, and Harold Pinter.) Her impulse to some sort of rationalization of ornament is apparent in the way she resolves those effects: the lining of the “Pagoda” jacket revealed at sleeve cuffs and collar is the verso of the brocade with its embroidered hummingbirds. The extreme structure of the wired hoops that articulate the flare of the jacket is in marked contrast to the pliable shaping of cuffs and neckband (a shirred modified mandarin collar). For Grès, the East held *Turan-dot* majesty and exoticism, but it was still within the thrall of her interpretation.

1. Evocative of Greek classicism, Grès’s Aphrodites are equally of the modernist vision. Grès practices immoderate economy of means and achieves an integrity of the whole garment. In each example, the great fullness of the skirt is compressed into tiny tucks that are introduced at the waist and engineered into the bodice in continuous lengths of fabric from hem to neckline. Hand stitching yields both the configuration and the cling. Even the “braided” neckline of the one-shouldered dress continues the same fabric and principle through its volutes, which are wrapped tightly across the top without interruption.

2. A double-faced wool coat enjoys the gravity of a traditional tailored garment, but tailoring is subverted through Grès’s accomplished three-dimensional draping. The coat’s asymmetrical pieces evoke the spiraling process of draping; even the collar band is a crescent that curves asymmetrically, becoming wider at the left and disappearing as it rounds the neck. Grès creates a rotating form in a wool coat just as she does in her manipulations of sheerest silk jersey. Her buoyant, coiling, winding seams displace gravity, yielding modernism’s essential “lightness of being.”

3. Left: The shaping of the jacket is created by a double horizontal band that extends from either front princess seam around the back. Grès has adapted the historical feature of the martingale and incorporated it as a structural panel. Grès creates subtle shape for the jacket by ab-

sorbing traditional dressmaking features in a contemporary tailored suit.

3. Right: Grès employs double-faced wool like a reversible shell. The joinings are finished in a clean welt with no seam allowance because the two faces of the fabric are split open and stitched together to a self-finished edge. The unseen interior is as beautifully finished as the exterior: other than the placement of the label, the suit could literally be reversed. This brown suit is remarkable for Grès’s use of the zigzag welts that conceal two of the buttonholes and suggest the way, even in a tailored piece, she considers a geometry imposed on the body. When the buttonhole falls at the angled seam, it is concealed, but when it floats in the body of the jacket, Grès employs a conventional horizontal one in realization of her decision to let the internal structure determine aesthetic signs on the veneer.

4. Grès borrows from the East and plays on the idea of the kimono sleeve. In contrast to the relative tubular symmetry of the kimono, Grès introduces an element of asymmetry in the skirt, in which all the fullness is isolated at the left hip. She exaggerates the light-faceting effect of a changeable taffeta by overlaying it with the shadows of the black organza, achieving a deeper iridescence than the taffeta alone would give. Each effect is rendered hyperbolic; every expectation is enhanced or made ironic.

5. Grès’s propensity for draping does not repudiate tailoring. On the contrary, the methodology she uses in her drapery and its distinctive visual qualities are inherent in her tailored garments. In choosing the strict cut of the spencer from the wardrobe of men’s military or service apparel, Grès begins with the regimen of a tailored idea. But she consummates the suit with a draper’s forms. The jacket is cut on the bias; a dolman sleeve with underarm tuck creates ease at the front shoulder and thrusts the sleeve to the back. When an arm is placed in the sleeve, the sleeve is brought forward and creates regular folds and a sculpted volume at upper arm and torso. A simple flared skirt features pockets slashed without regard for the grain of the fabric, a rare occurrence in conventional tailoring. Resolutely, Grès is a dressmaker; she thinks as a dressmaker. Even a suit of tailored rigor becomes a manifesto of soft shaping and dressmaker’s solutions.

6. Left: In a composition that is intrinsically modern in its conception, there is also an element of fashion history. A panel goes across the center front at the stomach and extends down into a loose drape in this early version of an effect Grès uses repeatedly. It is as if she had draped on the mannequin and then let the bolt of fabric continue until it ran out. But even this extravagance is monitored by a dressmaker's acumen and by historical reference as well. The gesture is one of utmost excess, allowing the dilation of fabric to serve as a kind of contemporary polonaise.

6. Right: Panels of taffeta function for Grès as gray, black, and white elements did for Whistler in his painted symphonies and arrangements. An elegant dress with crisscrossing panels of gray taffeta slightly varied in tint betrays its construction as the matrix of its apparent surfaces: the gray panels are continuous pieces that loop under to create a ballooning skirt in the manner of a helical harem skirt. Characteristically, Grès violates the side seam at the waist, where arcs cut into the waistline, visually diminishing it but also giving a sense—like that of Vionnet—of the body's three-dimensionality.

7. A cocktail dress and bolero that could bedeck a caryatid indicate Grès's inherent propensity for classical sculpture, but her creation is modernist as well. The drapery of the skirt is an extraordinary feat. It is composed of two separate rectangles of fabric that have been seamed together and wrapped in interlacing fashion, fulfilling Grès's ideal of draping, twisting, and maneuvering three-dimensionally around the model. Further, Grès was notably drawn to the draping properties of taffeta to hold folds in crisp yet resilient form.

8. Left: At first and from the front, a black-and-red dress might appear to be just bands of alternating ribbon, but the tiers continue horizontally in the skirt into ties that form huge bows at the back. The bows are not treated as trimming but, in fact, are inherently part of the structure of the dress. Ornament is integral to construction in Grès's work, thus affording her garments, even in their most romantic manifestations, a strong modernist position.

8. Right: This black velvet dress makes similar use of design as a structural element of the dress: the center back seam has been split and

carved away to create a laced aperture that adjusts the proper fit of the bodice. The thinking of this dress, which plays to reveal its construction, is architectural. Grès is always the stringent modernist: the drama is structural.

9. Left: The one-shoulder taffeta sheath in the foreground is augmented by a separate length of fabric stitched to the top and draped into a voluminous sleeve with the length of fabric then wrapped like a sari over the shoulder. Seldom has dressmaking demonstrated its process so vividly; it is as if Grès shows the evolution and action of draping. She reveals her mastery in this transformation of a basic sheath dress with its elemental sleeve panel into a sari-toga.

9. Right: Though not readily apparent, process is inexorably discernible for Grès. A basic black sheath becomes a dress of magisterial volume when a length of fabric is extended into sleeves. The triangular fall of the back drapery opens as the sleeves pull away from the body. Mothlike, the sleeves fold back into a continuous panel with the dress in a design synthesis and simplicity akin to non-Western untailored dress.

10. Grès's syncretistic Mughal jacket combines aspects of many cultures. The rows of quilting at the jacket's back that are patterned like Manchu court robes are stitched by machine, but the fields of blistered trapunto that incorporate birds in foliage are stitched by hand. The tailored components are juxtaposed against a shawl collar which is an unstructured, puffed band that resembles a small ruffle. The body of the jacket is a continuous piece, suspended from a back shoulder yoke in a seamless riddle that conflates East and West.

11. Like many designers of the 1960s, Grès drew upon a Jet Age assimilation of global traditions, often with a cavalier attitude that only perpetuated a picturesque colonialism. A Macedonian breastplate with imputations of Africa and China and Art Deco is composed of a sheer black organza with embroidery covering the torso like armor, but with a sense of skin beneath. What is apparently a skirt is actually culottes (draped like men's *hakama* pants with radiating folds) so amply cut that each leg could constitute a full skirt.

12. Left: Like an anthropomorphic geometer and also like a twentieth-century-art modernist,



Grès realizes the human body in arcs and triangles. An oatmeal jersey dress the designer had originally conceived for day was, at the client's request, lengthened for evening. The same geometry cuts into the body in tone-on-tone pieces.

12. Center: An unbroken length of violet angora is draped into cocoon- and capelike volume, its back view showing triangular exposure. Its shape emanates from a minimal intervention of darts. Achieved with the utmost economy of cut, Grès's prized caftans and capes use simple shapes and suggest the qualities of basic apparel.

12. Right: An evening dress with cape breaks the torso into a series of triangular elements of exposure and coverage, anticipating aspects of Geoffrey Beene's designs in the 1990s.

13. Silk jersey with an apron merges Grès's interest in ancient Greek draped silhouettes and in simple peasant garment traditions. The caryatid dress with a blouson and a full skirt is pulled in by a separate rectangle that ties like an apron in the back. Grès relishes the initial dissonance between the matte surface of the silk jersey evening gown and the sheen of the velvet apron.

14. Conspicuous and selective areas of nudity are always more provocative than total nudity. Grès's calculated bareness invariably suggests more revelation of the body than is actual. The designer is on the wearer's side in seeking unequivocal control over exposure. But a leaf motif on the white dress does not perform as in nature; Grès anchors the apparently meandering leaf to cover the breast as patently and securely as she creates a diagonal across the other. Here, the sheer organza that veils the bodice tantalizes further. Grès created a smoke-colored organza

wrap to go with this dress that played even more on the idea of nudity and transparency.

15. Grès's work is visually similar to the neo-classicism of French theater and arts of the 1920s and 1930s, but these earlier forms seldom placed the classical image organically into a modernist principle of design integrity. Grès delights in the extravagant exposure of caryatidlike figures with plunging necklines and open backs, but she allows no possibility of shifting or displacement of elements. Her ethos is one of classical control, not of license. The apparent looseness of the Grès drapery is a deception: the buoyant fluted surface of the bodice is fully anchored to a sheath or nude fitted shell. Ingres's frequently cited tribute to his paradigmatic master, "Raphael, en imitant sans cesse, fut toujours lui-même," also describes the artistic achievement of Grès in her many variations on the Greek draped dress. Like the voluptuous bathers painted by Ingres from the first decade of the nineteenth century through 1862–63, Grès's modulations of the drapé type are obsessive and yet progressive, continually evolving as art and invention.

Back cover. Left: A black jersey one-shoulder dress has a draped bodice that ends in radiating spaghetti straps across the back. It is as if Grès has eliminated fabrics and reduced everything to the structural lines of spaghetti straps like the reductive engineering of a suspension bridge.

Back cover. Right: A black jersey dress features a draped top that, although unstructured, does not lose its surety to embrace the body. A complex understructure moors the dress to the body, even with the outer appearance of slack nonchalance. Grès begins at the left back side, wrapping the drapery around and finishing off on the left front as if in a rotating process.

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Front cover. Evening ensemble with "Pagoda" jacket, 1935. Multicolored silk brocade designed by Raoul Dufy, with white satin ground and red silk crepe. Gift of Mrs. Harrison Williams, Lady Mendl, and Mrs. Ector Munn, 1946 (CI 46.4.19a,b).

Back cover. Left: Evening gown, 1971. Black silk jersey. Courtesy Mrs. Oscar de la Renta. Right: Evening gown, 1937-39. Black silk jersey. Gift of Z. E. Marguerite Pick, 1978 (1978.72.2a).